

LET'S PLAY BALL!

By ADNAN A. SIDDIQI



Namibia's Ewaald Steenkamp runs out Romeno Deane of the United States in a match at the ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup in Sri Lanka in February.

It was a bright warm day in April. Sandwiched uncomfortably in dusty Section E, I was probably the only American among some 15,000 die-hard Indian cricket fans in New Delhi's Ferozeshah Kotla Stadium. I dined merrily on my bag of peanuts and tried to blend in, even though I hadn't attended a professional cricket match since 1981 and was no longer sure whether "silly mid-on" was a field position or part of a player's undergarments. Better not to ask, I thought to myself. Suddenly, a roar ascended as an early Pakistani wicket fell and then, just as dramatically, chants of "Aa-loo! Aa-loo!" A potato? Who can think of food at a time like this? Oh, I see, it's just the burly Pakistani captain coming to bat. His swagger and grace make me think of the U.S. baseball legend and home run king Babe Ruth.

Stop, freeze frame, rewind. My mind races back three decades to 1975, to a loud, cavernous castle much like Kotla, but this time it's New York's famed Yankee Stadium—the "House that Ruth Built"—and the chant rising out of the upper deck is not "Aa-loo!" but "Lou, Lou!" Yep, I would often watch local favorite Lou Piniella come up to bat at crucial moments for his team. Being a New York Mets fan I never did care much for the

cross-town New York Yankees. Piniella was especially reviled around the major leagues for his unpredictable temper and proclivity for kicking dirt on an umpire whenever a decision didn't go his way. Nevertheless, Lou was definitely a premier hitter (in more ways than one) and on this occasion he lined a hit to center. The bleacher bums went wild. I stood up and "boo-ed" but my boo sounded like "Lou" and so none of the frenzied Yankee fans around me took any great notice.

To be equally enamored with both cricket and baseball is somewhat rare, as the two sports have such different histories, have very different rules, and (at the level of we, the fans) they appeal to very different human senses and sensibilities. Granted the basic goal of the game is the same (to score the most runs) and the tactics are parallel (hit the ball over their heads, through their legs or "wherever they ain't"). And one can certainly see how the rush of adrenaline from a 400-foot home run can



ERIC RISBERG © AP/WIDEWORLD

approximate that felt after a towering sixer. But for most inward-looking Americans, let's face it, cricket is a little, invisible black insect that we hear at night when we barbecue steaks and hamburgers in our backyards. Indians at least know that baseball is a sport and not a creature, but they categorically dismiss it as a primitive version (read perversion) of the original Gentleman's Game. And what is that black-looking stuff you Americans keep spitting out during TV camera close-ups? Is it tobacco, *supari* or *paan*, the South Asian wives are always curious to know. The cultural disconnects are endless, but here I am, liking both sports. Call it NRI-induced schizophrenia. Call it a hunger for peanuts, popcorn and Cracker Jacks. Call it multiculturalism and a fascination for the other. Or call it just a love for choreography and spectacle, watching swift, elegant athletes dive across freshly cut grass to rob the batter of precious runs.

My American friends often make fun of my fascination with cricket. A five-day match? No way! We Americans want instant gratification, three hours or less please, and make sure you give us a result and a winner, because draws are anathema, a colossal waste of time! Break for lunch and then break for tea? In

The San Diego Padres' Dave Roberts avoids a run-out by diving back to first base as the ball gets past the San Francisco Giants' Lance Niekro during a September 2005 game in San Francisco.

Cricket-Loving Florida Town

Lauderhill is unique among U.S. cities. Responding to residents' desires, the city authorities used some funds from a parks bond to build a state-of-the-art cricket stadium in a new regional sports park in Broward County, in south Florida. Lauderhill was hoping its stadium, to be completed by 2007, would be chosen as a World Cup venue. Although that didn't happen, cricket madness is growing: there are free, 20-overs night matches in the local Lauderhill Sports Park; the fourth annual Mayor's International Cricket Cup has just finished; and teams from the Bahamas and Sri Lanka are expected soon. "This year's semi-final game, where India played Jamaica, was a heart stopper, down to the last ball," Leslie Tropepe, Lauderhill's public relations manager, says of the Mayor's Cup. Mandeep Dhillon, one of two "India" team captains, made the

most runs and took the most wickets during the three-and-a-half-month tournament. The matches are free as the city is trying to promote cricket. During a match at the city sports park, soccer and netball teams are also competing. "Spectators can enjoy all three sports, listen to music, hear play-by-play commentaries, all while eating flying fish or jerk chicken," says Tropepe. "There is nothing like it in the United States.

"South Florida is a melting pot," she adds. "When you have a diverse community such as ours we get to experience all the best of what other cultures enjoy, in food, music, sports, etc. Cricket has been played here for years on softball fields, soccer fields and other patches of open space."

Nearly a quarter of Lauderhill's 70,000 residents were born in the West Indies, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, and some



Courtesy The Jones Construction Company, Lauderhill

Aerial view of the cricket stadium in Lauderhill.

40 languages are spoken within its 23 square kilometers. Mayor Richard J. Kaplan, a batsman who has been playing cricket for several years, joined with the city commissioners to establish

the Mayor's Cup. The 10 teams are members of two Florida leagues affiliated with The United States of America Cricket Association. "The players proudly play in the tournament to represent the country of their heritage or birth," says Tropepe. "It's highly competitive." —L.K.L.

Baseball Lives in South India

By CHRISTOPHER WURST

It must have been a strange sight for the students and VIPs who had gathered for the first annual YMCA College of Physical Education's baseball tournament in Chennai. The chief guest—me—wasn't sitting on stage in the shade, but had suited up as the starting shortstop for the Year II Physical Education Masters team. It certainly left certain protocol—and batting order—issues up in the air. Standing there in the infield brought back the same enthusiasm and joy I felt about playing baseball when I was young. It's gratifying to know that more and more people in South India are getting the opportunity to share that feeling.

Wherever you find baseball in Tamil Nadu, you are sure to find Nazim Fareed. He is an unabashed lover of baseball and tireless secretary of the Chennai District Baseball Association and the Tamil Nadu Baseball Association. He travels around the state organizing baseball tournaments, teaching fundamentals and spreading his infectious love of the game. "I

Right: The Eagle Stars baseball team with Nazim Fareed (second from left).

Below: The winning team at the YMCA tournament receives the trophy from Christopher Wurst (center).

was a cricket fan growing up, like so many youngsters here," he says, "but I turned to baseball because it's a faster game and in two hours you get the results." Aside from being baseball's ambassador to South India, Fareed manages the Eagle Stars baseball team, a club that participates in tournaments throughout the south. The Eagle Stars, featuring all three of Fareed's sons, recently hosted a team from Karnataka. The Eagle

Stars were also instrumental in reintroducing the sport to the YMCA College of Education in Chennai, the first college for physical education in India, established by Harry Crowe Buck from Liverpool, Pennsylvania, a dedicated baseball lover, in 1920.

Fareed and his Eagle Stars devote a lot of time to teaching baseball to students from underprivileged backgrounds, especially in *madrassas* in Chennai. As a

result, baseball has taken off at a number of local schools. At Anjuman-e-Himayath-e-Islam, in Chennai, the Eagle Stars have done such a good job of coaching that they actually have their hands full every time the two teams square off. In fact, several Anjuman players have been selected for the Indian national youth team.

What struck me most, standing between second and third base—pounding the baseball glove that I've had for more than 20 years, and that has traveled the world with me—was the seemingly effortless transition these young adults had made to this new sport. They were having a great time. When small rules issues arose, both teams helped each other to come to an understanding. And when the final game ended, the attitude among both teams was unanimous: Let's play again! □

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Courtesy Nazim Fareed



T.G. VENKATESH

baseball, a 10-minute “seventh inning stretch” is quite enough, thank you, just time enough to grab a greasy hot dog or an autograph from the dugout. And what is this business about batting “partnerships” and two innings? We want to cheer our heroes one at a time, and we also want to see them bat four or five times in a game, so that they get more chances at individual glory—we Americans believe in third and fourth chances in life, just as in baseball.

The eyes of my Indian friends glaze over when I mention baseball. They are appalled that our players go through more than 300 balls a game as umpires allow fans to keep foul balls as souvenirs, a colossal waste of money! They cringe when they see baseball players rant and rave two inches from an umpire’s beak. Gentlemanly cricketers accept decisions with a stiff upper lip and always show respect to the omnipotent man in white; unfair decisions are fate/karma and will eventually even out over a period of time, so no sense arguing about it, mate.

Truth be told, the two sports thrive on a lazy, laid-back pace, followed by unexpected bursts of excitement, sort of like your typical nine-to-five desk job, with the burst of excitement being your daily lunch break or a meeting with the big boss. Who wins and who loses is often determined by “atmospherics”—the decibel level of the crowd, the speed and direction of the wind, the glare of the sun, the moisture level of the grass. Both sports require brain power, strategy, memory. You are not a true fan or a worthy coach until you can follow and anticipate every move by every player on the field.

Baseball players (and their coaches, scouts, agents, managers and general managers) love to pore over videos of themselves and the opposition to gain every slight or perceived advantage. Not only will a particular pitcher’s pick-off move be analyzed frame by frame to see if he’s vulnerable to stolen bases, but true devotees will also study how often he balks, what the pitch count is when he usually throws back to first base, and perhaps even what he eats for breakfast on game days.

Cricket captains are just as analytical, driven and superstitious. They are known to arrive at the grounds early in the morning to study hundreds of minute cracks and blades of grass creeping onto a wicket. They and their players are equally infatuated with batting, bowling and fielding statistics, and of course the exalted history of The Game. Both sports do their countries proud, for they are both democratic and pluralist at the level of the common man and woman. Age, gender, skill, income level matter little on public sandlots in the United States or maidans in India. Shout

President George W. Bush, once the owner of a baseball team, the Texas Rangers, tries his hand at cricket during his stopover in Pakistan in March. Many of America’s Founding Fathers played cricket, and America’s first President, George Washington, was among many cricket fans in the fledgling country in the 1700s and 1800s. In fact, the first international cricket match was played in the United States in 1844 at Bloomingdale Park in New York City, against a Canadian team, which won by 23 runs. As baseball gained popularity from the early 1900s, cricket faded, until an immigrant-driven resurgence in the 1970s. Cricket is now played in all 50 states.



CHARLES DHARAPAK © AP/WIDEWORLD

“Play Ball” or “Yaar, bowling karo” and people assemble instantly.

I snap out of my daydream. “Aaloo” Inzamam hits a four, the crowd in Kotla groans. No point jeering the Pakistani now that he is on a roll. Minutes later, he hits a ball straight at a fielder and makes an ambitious, ill-advised run for it. Crash go the wickets, the instant replay shows that Aaloo is out by a mile (or rather a kilometer) but no signal from the ump, I mean umpire. The Indian team goes on playing, without a word of protest, nay not even an upturned eyebrow or a cynical look to the sky—no, that wouldn’t do at all. That wouldn’t be cricket if they did.

I chuckle to myself, picturing coach Greg Chappell lumbering out to give the white-coat man a verbal dressing-down which everyone knows he deserves, if not the full “dirt bath” that Piniella (now a baseball manager) and others like him habitually bestow on umpires on the other side of the Atlantic and Pacific. It would be just as hilarious of course to see baseball players, managers and coaches getting a multiple-match suspension for using four-letter words or obliged to apologize to the fans and media, an outcome that is a given when the rare cricketer steps out of line.

I’m no psychologist, but they say it’s good therapy to step out of yourself once in a while. Take a walk on the wild side, do something different. I’d love to see a member of the cricket audience refuse to give back a “sixer” or a “four” that he just caught after sitting in the sun for seven hours. Let him scream, “No, it’s mine!” as he is hauled away in handcuffs or carried away (Lagaan-style) on the shoulders of delirious, newly-empowered cricket players, fans and peanut-sellers. □

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